**Executive Summary**

One hundred and twenty five people gathered at Washington State University Vancouver to discuss access to higher education. Divided equally among 19 tables, facilitators asked participants to provide their thoughts and opinions on the affordability of a college education, how to improve the campus learning environment, and how to better prepare future students for success in higher education. Most participants recognized that a freeze or reduction of college tuition rates would place a financial burden on institutions; a decrease in funding would make it difficult to maintain the quality of faculty, staff, and campus services expected in today’s collegiate environment. Addressing ways to improve the learning environment, many participants agreed that faculty and students must have a better understanding of the modern technological tools that can be used in the classroom and as a means of communication between faculty and students. As a result, these participants embraced the idea of colleges offering more online or hybrid courses using web-based technology, making class schedules more flexible for working students or students with families. Table groups also discussed the need to create a stronger bond between institutions of higher education and the surrounding community through internships and off-campus work-study opportunities. All tables supported earlier and increased involvement among parents, high school counselors, and teachers in the college preparation process. Most participants agreed that high school students need a broader and more in-depth education on the responsibilities that are inherent among institutions of higher education, including financial support, time management, and communication with college faculty and staff. Participants also believed that future events should be more inclusive of parents’ voices, particularly those that are least likely to consider a college or university education a viable option for their family.

**Report for the *Initiative for Public Deliberation’s* Exercise on College Access**

**Washington State University Vancouver, April 24, 2015**

Approximately 200 people attended the Southwest Washington Community Summit on College Access held at Washington State University Vancouver, of which 125 participated in a deliberative exercise conducted by The Thomas S. Foley Institute’s *Initiative for Public Deliberation*. Participants were asked to provide their thoughts and opinions on the affordability of a college education, how to improve the campus learning environment, and how to better prepare future students for success in higher education. One hundred and twenty five individuals participated in the deliberation exercise, with an average of seven participants at one of 19 tables led by a facilitator and note taker. Conversations at each table were captured by audio and written notes, and comments were later translated anonymously. Throughout the discussion the facilitator sought to find areas of commonality and disagreement among the group. Following is a summary of the main themes, some unique findings, and concluding thoughts.

Participants discussed a variety of options when addressing the affordability issue of contemporary higher education. One option was whether a freeze or decrease in the cost of tuition should be implemented for community colleges and universities in the area. Of the 59 participants who expressed an opinion on the matter, almost equal numbers supported and opposed reducing the cost of tuition in some way. According to the 22 participants who would opposed a tuition freeze or decrease, the main concern in doing so was that it could cause a significant decrease in the overall quality of education for students because there would be fewer funds to pay for faculty, staff, and student services. One group feared that reducing tuition would likely increase enrollment, but would also result in an increased demand for more classes and services with little to no tuition-based funds to provide them. Conversely, the 37 participants who supported a freeze or decrease in the cost of tuition argued that these potential negative consequences should not prevent higher education institutions from at least attempting to make college more affordable for current and future students. One group claimed the continuous increases in tuition acts as a barrier that excludes lower-income citizens from accessing higher education. Another group of participants said that if there is strong enough evidence showing how tuition reductions would in fact lower the quality of education and services, they would support paying an additional tax to help provide the necessary funds for those colleges that do reduce the cost of tuition.

There was unanimous support among participants offering a perspective on whether we should incentivize local and state employers to offset or reimburse the cost of tuition for future or current employees through an internship or mentorship program. Several groups mentioned duplicating Starbucks’s program, which offers a financial match to assist with college costs. In fact, only one participant out of the 88 who discussed the idea opposed it, arguing that businesses should not be financially pressured by higher education institutions to do anything that could damage their profit margins. The remaining participants strongly encouraged a variety of ways the business community and higher education institutions could collaborate and develop a stronger partnership to help students find the right kind of employment immediately after graduation. Approximately half of the groups, for example, supported increasing the number of internships across all disciplines where students can work for a business or corporation associated with their field of study while completing their degree in exchange for the business helping offset those students’ tuition. Moreover, participants explained, a greater number of internship that help pay for the cost of tuition would also provide students with valuable on-the-job training and experience where students can actually apply what they are learning in classroom to the real world. This was seen as to both students and employers because the former would be better trained and the latter would benefit from more “job ready” employees. Most participants also agreed that it would not be difficult to incentivize and educate business employers to offset or reimburse the cost of tuition for interns or new employees since it is a matter of investing in the future of their industry by helping relieve the financial burdens of those pursuing a higher education to succeed in the current workplace environment. However, one group did note that some businesses, especially smaller businesses, find it difficult to determine “how” to be more involved in partnerships with the University. And, a second group mentioned that in their experience, local businesses were more proactive than the University in forging partnerships. Finally, several groups proposed a variety of tax incentives for business that partner with higher education internship programs, and claimed they would support paying slightly higher taxes to help fund these tax incentives.

Most participants also expressed strong support for increasing the availability and size of state and federal grants as well as lower interest loans in light of the burgeoning student loan debts associated with contemporary higher education. Fifty-four of the 59 participants who specifically discussed the availability of grants agreed that if more state and/or federal grants were made available, more people would be encouraged to pursue a college degree. Similarly, these participants also argued that the interest rates on student loans should be significantly lower and more predictable and the current program for student loan forgiveness opportunities should be made more available to a higher number of students with growing loan debts. One group proposed lobbying the state and federal legislatures more intensely to increase the allocation of funds for an increase in higher education grants. The five participants who opposed increasing state and/or federal grants did so because they did not want to bear the burden of having to pay an increase in taxes to help pay for any new grants. Conversely, many of the 54 participants who supported an increase in grants and low interest loans stated that paying higher taxes was acceptable if that money would allow more people to access higher education. Of note, two tables mentioned that the availability of grants and loans needed to be expanded to assist not only low-income, but also middle-income families. Two tables also mentioned the necessity of including financial literacy training or guidance to those seeking loans.

Another option for making higher education more affordable that received strong support among most participants was to reduce the affiliated costs of going to college, such as having to pay for the various institutional service fees, course textbooks, and parking permits. Of the 42 participants who expressed an opinion on reducing affiliated higher education costs, nine opposed doing so primarily because it would certainly result in a significant reduction or possibly complete elimination of valuable student services that are already short on funds, such as those services oriented for the accommodation of nontraditional students who are disabled or whose primary language is not English. On the other hand, of the 33 participants supporting the reduction of affiliated costs, many focused specifically on the cost and number of textbooks for any given course. Most argued that textbooks are outrageously expensive, and higher education institutions need to collaborate with textbook publishers to make them much more affordable for students, such as increasing the availability of low-cost textbook rentals. Participants also argued that instructors should use more digital and on-line, open source material instead of hard copy textbooks for their classes. In addition to reducing the cost of textbooks, many participants argued that parking permits for commuter campuses like WSU Vancouver need to be much less expensive, or else offer a more affordable alternative like a student-discounted C-Tran bus pass. One table agreed that, while offsetting transit costs was critical, access to public transportation remained quite limited, which decreased the likelihood students would take advantage of it to travel to college or university.

The discussions about the different options for improving the campus learning environment similarly received strong support and little disagreement among most participants. For example, 61 of the 65 participants who expressed an opinion on whether resources should go toward enhancing student services that support student life on campus strongly supported doing so. More specifically, these participants argued that significantly more academic advisors are needed to help students better understand the often complicated credit requirements associated with obtaining a college degree. Several groups also expressed a need for more faculty mentoring for future careers and future higher education opportunities, as well peer mentoring, especially for groups that might struggle with the transition to a college or university, such as first generation students. Having a dedicated program, such as a skill center or college “navigators” where students could seek out specific advice, was recommended. In addition to expanding the number and availability of academic, faculty and peer advisors, several groups mentioned that here should also be more on-campus healthcare services and an extension of daycare services for students with children that would include cheaper costs and longer hours for students taking night classes. More importantly for some participants, the distribution of information on the various services available to students should be done more frequently and more aggressively throughout the academic year and not just during new student orientations. Others recommended greater attention to students who were struggling, such as free tutoring and access to skills centers to assist with writing and math. Several groups mentioned the need to start advising and mentoring far before one enters college – suggesting that preparation begin in middle and high school so students are more “college ready.” This would require, these participants suggested, enhanced partnerships with K-12 schools and institutions of higher learning. Many other participants focused on the need to enhance infrastructure-related services such as parking space availability and wifi access both on and near campus.

When asked whether offering more flexible scheduling and course delivery mechanisms would improve the college learning environment, participants who discussed the idea once again showed near unanimous support. All but six of the 61 participants who addressed this issue supported a significant change from the traditional method of course delivery, advocating for a flexible options including on-line courses, hybrid courses combining in-class lecture and on-line requirements, a higher number of evening class options, and even courses taught on the weekends. Indeed, three separate groups all agreed that while there would likely have to be a pay increase for those instructors who taught them, offering more evening and weekend classes would offer many working students and students with families a significantly higher opportunity of obtaining a college education in a much shorter amount of time. Relatedly, offering a larger number of on-line and hybrid courses would not only be cost-efficient for the both students and higher education institutions, but given the advancement in computer technologies and internet speed would certainly alleviate some of the stress students deal with when having to register for required courses they need and manage transportation to, and hour-to-hour scheduling for on-campus courses. According to the few participants who were hesitant to support more flexible scheduling and course delivery mechanisms, they recognized that the above options could work well for some programs and disciplines, but many courses with difficult material must be delivered in the traditional method via face-to-face instruction, and should not be required to shift to on-line delivery. Two groups also suggested offering classes on-site at different locations, including local businesses, either during the lunch hour or in the evening, which would assist a category of students who might not have the time or resources to travel to a college campus.

Participants also focused on the viability of a thriving internship program as a means to improve the campus learning environment. Of the 63 participants who emphasized the importance of a strong campus internship program, all but four agreed that the experiential learning that comes from on off-campus, real workplace internship must be prioritized more than it currently is. Perhaps more importantly, a strong internship program would likely coincide with an even stronger on-campus career placement program that would help students find the appropriate work upon graduation. One group of participants argued that completing an internship at a business operating in the industry of a student’s degree major should be a credit requirement to graduate. A number of these 63 participants suggested that students complete an internship each year of their academic career, which is especially important during the freshman and sophomore years so students can actually experience the real-life application of what they may be interested in learning more about and determine if that career field is appropriate for them. While some participants recognized how difficult it would be to open and maintain the lines of communication between campus internship programs and the business community, it is not inconceivable to believe that college faculty and business employers could agree on mutual interests and benefits to collaborating in an experiential learning internship program.

Also vital to improving the campus learning environment would be to better facilitate mentorship and counseling support for students throughout their college experience. Forty-seven participants discussed the need to incentivize higher education institutions to organize faculty-student mentorships, and agreed that a properly administered mentorship program would ensure that students are receiving the necessary guidance on how to manage all the different responsibilities associated with college life. Several groups suggested the adoption of a “college success” mentorship program, where each student, in addition to an academic advisor, is also properly matched with a campus faculty or staff mentor to help them better understand and prepare for every aspect of the higher education culture. An on-campus faculty mentor would be particularly helpful for first-generation college students whose parents have no experience in higher education and cannot provide any guidance or advice to their children starting college. In addition to an on-campus faculty mentor, some participants argued that each student should also be assigned a professional mentor external to the higher education institution who could better prepare the student for how they will need to apply what they learn in college to the real-world work force. If each student is matched with an on-campus or off-campus mentor, or both, most participants agreed that it would be absolutely necessary to establish an appropriate matching system where students are being paired with a mentor they can relate to as much as possible, especially in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, and age.

The 36 participants who specifically discussed campus support for students of color, veterans, and students with disabilities also unanimously agreed that there must be greater outreach to these students to better understand their experiences on college campus, and whether enough is being done to give them an equal opportunity to succeed. Several groups strongly encouraged expanding the dialogue with nontraditional students as a necessary means to increase the cultural competency for all students, faculty, and staff on college campuses. One group of participants proposed that everyone on a college campus should frequently complete a climate survey oriented toward improving an educational culture that embraces diversity. The results from frequent climate surveys would also help campus faculty and administrators more quickly address any inherent and unintended cultural biases within the classrooms or student services. Additionally, many participants believed that there are not enough on-campus support services for military veteran students or first generation students whose primary language is not English. Several groups strongly encouraged that more classes be offered in other languages such as Spanish and Russian, which would encourage more international or first-generation students to apply to college. While the costs of expanding these support services could be expensive these participants believed it is necessary to take on any additional costs that would improve the campus learning environment for everyone, especially those considered to be nontraditional students.

The topic that seemed to receive the most attention among all participants was how to improve college readiness for future students. In particular, participants strongly agreed that parents and the public school districts must do more to not only encourage younger generations to consider college as a viable pathway to success, but more importantly better prepare college-bound students for the many responsibilities involved with being an independent college student. Of the 75 participants who expressed an opinion on whether parents and families must do more to encourage their children to consider going to a higher education institution, only eight said that college faculty and administrators have no place in telling parents how to dictate their children’s future, especially if those parents, like many, do not consider higher education as the only pathway to success.

All other participants tended to agree that the role higher education institutions should take when helping parents be more encouraging to their children about college options is all about providing the necessary information earlier and more frequently. More specifically, these participants offered several ideas on how to better educate parents on the viability of higher education for their children’s future success. Several groups suggested that many parents do not encourage their children to think about going to college because the parents cannot afford to pay for their tuition, but most parents are simply unaware about the variety of financial assistance options available to them. Higher education institutions should therefore offer, and aggressively promote, a series of free on-campus seminars designed specifically to inform and train parents on the application processes for scholarships, grants, and state and federal subsidized loans. More importantly for some groups, reaching out to inform and educate parents should happen much sooner in their children’s lives. Rather than waiting until their children’s junior or senior year in high school, colleges should begin communicating with the parents of children in middle school so they have significantly more time to find the financial assistance for their children’s future college education. One group even suggested that colleges work with regional hospitals to distribute a “preparing for your children’s future” packet that includes preliminary higher education financial assistance information for parents of newborns. The general theme throughout these conversations was that institutions of higher learning, in partnership with administrators at K-12 institutions, must make a more concerted effort to demystify the process of preparing for, and applying to, colleges and universities, and that this effort begin early and continue throughout a child’s secondary education.

Nearly all participants also agreed that the teachers, advisors, and counselors at public middle and high schools must do more to not only encourage students to think seriously about higher education, but more importantly better prepare those who plan on going to college after graduating from high school. Only nine of the 68 participants who discussed whether middle and high school faculty should prepare future college students believed that since college is simply not for everyone, the already insufficient resources in the K-12 public education system should be devoted more toward finding the correct curriculum that will make U.S. high school graduates more prepared for the work force. According to the remaining 59 participants, middle and high school faculty should invite college representatives, like currently enrolled students, to give presentations to their students on what college life is really like and how it is easily accessible to anyone. Similarly, colleges should do more to encourage middle and high school teachers to bring their students to campuses for multiple field trips so they can see first-hand what the higher education environment looks like and determine themselves if they want to be a part of it.

Many participants also suggested that teachers at both middle and high schools find the time in their schedule to teach their students about the many different responsibilities involved in being a college student, such as time management, proper communication with college instructors, and the fiscal challenges of independently managing a budget that includes the costs of tuition and textbooks. It would be very important for these middle and high school teachers to begin the conversation on the different financial assistance options available in higher education, which is why many participants suggested that these teachers invite someone from a campus financial aid office to make a presentation and send students home with informational packets for their parents. Most participants agreed that these conversations are happening far too late in the public education system and supported the idea to begin talking to middle school students instead of waiting until they are in their junior or senior year of high school. But these conversations weren’t only focused on speaking to students about the potential benefits of a college or university education – many participants explained the need to provide a more effective K-12 experience – a focus on arts and the humanities and valuable soft skills, rather than teaching to mandatory state and/or federal tests, not only to better prepare them for higher education, but for the employment sector, which also requires proficiency with “soft skills” and “21st century skills” such as problem solving, ability to collaborate, comfort with technology, etc.

It is important to note that a minority of participants in a small number of groups articulated the point that a college or university degree is not for everyone – that there are good jobs, that are valuable and which pay well, that are for those without a college degree.

When participants were asked to think of an alternative option to those introduced by the facilitator, many groups shared the opinion that middle school and high school freshmen and sophomore students, and the parents of those students, need to be more informed on the College-Bound Scholarship and Running Start programs as affordable options to obtain a higher education. According to the 52 participants that discussed these programs, there is a dearth of information about the utility of these programs being provided to parents and students. This is especially true for the Running Start program, which many participants agreed is a great opportunity to earn college credits while still finishing high school requirements, but many higher education institutions are not doing enough to support the program. These participants argued that colleges should offer more Running Start eligible courses in a wider variety of disciplines and programs, and the testing requirements to determine a student’s eligibility should be much easier. If these simple program adjustments were made, in addition to a new aggressive campaign to promote Running Start as an affordable option, these participants strongly believed that more students would take advantage of the program. It would also help address the affordability issue, as college credits earned through Running Start or similar programs could offset the high cost of tuition.

Each group was also asked if there were any important voices missing from the discussion that must be included in any future events. Almost every group agreed that they would have liked to have heard the thoughts and views from a variety of parents with children that are thinking about going to college, currently in college, and children that have gone to college in order to better understand the different challenges they face in paying for higher education. Similarly, participants also wanted to hear from parents who immigrated to the country and have children who could be first-generation college students to know what information they need to support their children’s pursuit of a higher education. Several groups specifically called out the need to be more inclusive of families living in poverty, from communities of color, and others who may be in greater need of assistance, such as those who are homeless. Some participants would have liked to hear from actual high school students and the extent to which they are being informed about higher education options from their teachers, advisors, and counselors. In addition to a variety of government officials ultimately responsible for determining the amount and size of grants being made available to college students, many participants wanted to hear from representatives of the business industry to know what incentives they would need to be offered to actually consider working with colleges to adopt experiential learning and internship programs that could offset or reimburse the costs of tuition. Finally, participants thought it would be important to include the voices of more current college students in future discussions, especially low-income students, students representative of protected minority classes, and students who have served in the military.

Many participants agreed that having these discussions focused on improving the access and affordability of higher education was successful because it represented several values important to the region. For some participants, the best part of the Southwest Washington region is the success its citizens tend to achieve through open conversations inclusive to anyone who wants to participate. The region’s citizens recognize that serious change can only occur through the establishment of important partnerships and working together toward a common cause, and the importance of maintaining the value of higher education is an issue that everyone has an interest in. All communities in the region similarly value equality in accessibility to all institutions and public spaces, which is why the discussions on improving the campus learning environment for nontraditional students were of prime importance for almost all participants. The Southwest Washington communities also embrace the value of cultural diversity and higher education institutions must have the external support to mirror that value and encourage a learning environment that is not only affordable for everyone, but does everything possible to prevent the perpetuation of any biases or the exclusion of any unidentified groups from obtaining a college degree.

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